Defining the phenomenon of jihadist radicalisation: drivers and catalysts local global

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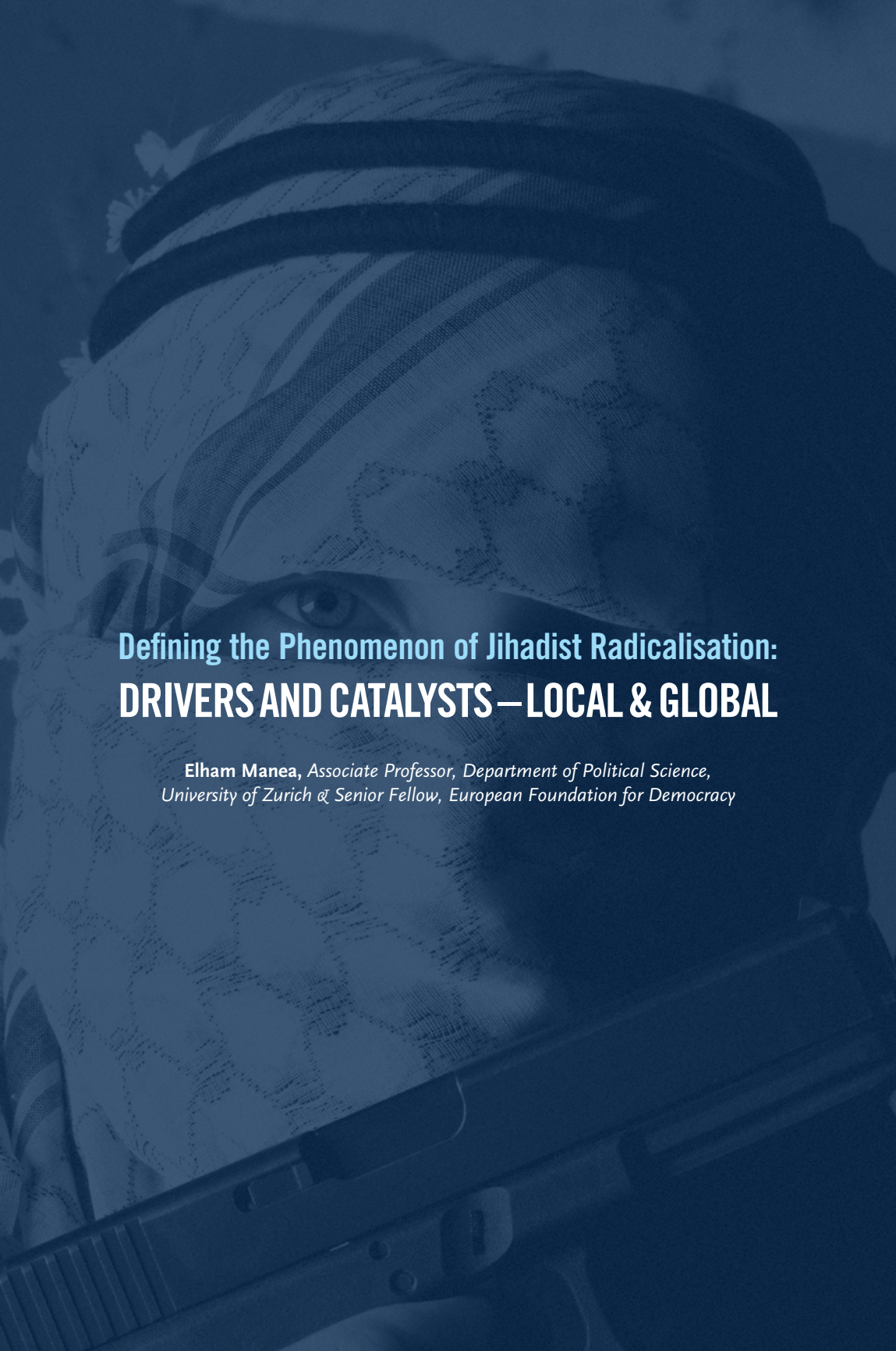

Defining the Phenomenon of Jihadist Radicalisation: DRIVERS AND CATALYSTS – LOCAL & GLOBAL

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"We are ISIS."

This was the title of an article written by former Kuwaiti Minister of Information, Saad bin Tafla al Ajami, published on 7 August 2014 by the Qatari newspaper *al Sharq*.[1]

The former Kuwaiti Minister was not celebrating the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS), nor the atrocities that it was/is committing against civilians and minorities in Iraq and Syria. He was reminding his readers that ISIS, while condemned by the majority of Muslims, is a product of an **Islamic religious discourse** that has dominated the Muslim public sphere over recent decades – a mainstream discourse!

ISIS "did not come from another planet," he said. **"It is not a product of the infidel West or a bygone orient,"** he insisted.

No, "the truth that we cannot deny is: ISIS learned from our schools, prayed in our mosques, listened to our media... and our religious platforms, read from our books and references, and followed *Fatwas* (religious edicts) we produced."

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The former Minister was addressing the role played by some Arab Gulf nations in mainstreaming a radical form of Islam, specifically **Salafism**, which provides, among others, the essence of Jihadists' radicalisation religious worldview and narration.

Oddly enough, his message may well contribute to the on-going academic debate on the phenomenon of radicalisation and its root causes, namely the heated and controversial discussion between the two eminent French scholars, **Gilles Kepel** and **Olivier Roy**. How to define a phenomenon and its root causes is crucial to understand. It has clear ramifications if policymakers of the European Union (EU), US and Arab and Islamic countries are to succeed in confronting and defeating one of the main security challenges of the 21st century: Jihadi radicalisation. This task can prove to be difficult in a highly charged political context.

[1] Quoted in Manea, Elham, "Time to face the ISIS inside of US", Human Rights Blog, 17 August, 2014, available at: https://gmablog.org/2014/08/17/time-to-face-the-isis-inside-of-us/.

This chapter will attempt to chart an outline of the main conceptual positions on the term radicalisation, Jihadi radicalisation, and its drivers and catalysts both on local and global levels. The aim is to highlight that while these positions differ, they may, more than often, complement each other.

The charged public debate between Gilles Kepel and Olivier Roy will serve as a main discussion point to the issue. A section will follow with an overview of the definitions existing in academic literature and policy papers on the term radicalisation and violent radicalisation. The third concluding session will provide **a definition of Jihadi radicalisation** and how scholarly differences in defining the phenomenon reflect on the policy measures designed to address it.

An Islamisation of Radicalisation or the Radicalisation of Islam?

Gilles Kepel and Olivier Roy - two distinguished French academics - do not need an introduction. Both have worked on the **broader phenomenon of Islamism** and offered valuable insights into violent radicalisation in Europe. Both have worked within the tradition of French sociology on radicalisation, have lists of books to their name, and years of on-the-ground experience in the Middle East, Central Asia and French suburbs. And both were colleagues and enjoyed a friendship over the course of their careers - one that came to an abrupt end with a public and messy confrontation.[2]

At the heart of their differences is a clash of analysis on the drivers and catalysts that pave the ground for the radicalisation and recruitment of French citizens of migrant background. Simply put, it is whether the spat of home-grown violence that gripped France in the last couple of years can be attributed to a ***radicalisation of Islam*** or an I***slamisation of radicalisation***.

Within their tradition of French sociology, Gilles Kepel and Olivier Roy have influenced the study of radicalisation by describing its overall cultural and socioeconomic context. Both have identified the **marginalised dysfunctional French suburbs** (*banlieues*) as the pool from which second and third-generation migrants are being radicalised. And both in essence agree that radicalisation of these youths is a process that seeks to **reconstruct a lost identity** in a perceived hostile and confusing world.[3]

It is how and in which context this radicalisation takes place that seems to set them apart (with an emphasis on the word ***seems***). That difference was leaked out of academic circles and publicly argued and fought on newspaper platforms.

More than a week after the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) Jihadists massacred 130 people in Paris, Roy, who teaches at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy, published an op-ed in the newspaper Le Monde with the title 'Jihadism is a generational and nihilist revolution'. He argued that the young French Muslims who committed this atrocity "did so less because they were Muslim than because they were young". Radicalised French youth recruited by ISIS are seeking **"a cause, a label, a grand narrative on which to slap the blood-stained signature of their personal revolt"**. To him the real threat to France and the rest of the West is not ISIS, "which will sooner or later disappear like a mirage", it is "the nihilistic and revolutionary reflexes of a certain cross-section of alienated youths". They are **rebels seeking a cause** and, hence, what France and the rest of the West are facing is "not the radicalisation of Islam, but the Islamisation of radicalism".[4]

Mr. Kepel, a professor at the prestigious Institut d'Etudes Politiques de Paris (Sciences-Po), reacted to Roy's arguments with an article published in the newspaper Libération titled "The King Is Naked", playing on the meaning of Roy's name in French.[5]

In a strong language, he suggested that Roy first visits the suburbs from which these terrorists emerged – which have turned into hothouses for Salafism. Roy, Kepel argued, was just echoing the analysis first proposed by American specialists who, "knowing neither Arabic nor Arabs, declared that these acts of terrorism were the product of ruptures with their dominant societies".[6]

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[2] Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen "Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 33:9, 2010, p. 799; Adam Nossiter, "That Ignoramus': Two French Scholars of Radical Islam Turn Bitter Rivals", *New York Times*, July 12, 2016. For some of their books see for instance: Kepel, Gilles, *Terror in Frankreich*, München: Verlag Antje Kunstmann, 2016; Kepel, Gilles, *Allah in the West: Islamic Movements in America and Europe*, Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1997; Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for an New Ummah*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

[3] Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, p. 799.

[4] Roy Olivier, "Le djihadisme est une révolte générationnelle et nihiliste", Le Monde, 24 November 2015, available at: http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2015/11/24/le-djihadisme-une-revolte-generationnelle-et-nihiliste_4815992_3232.html. Cited in Robert Zaretsky, "Radicalized Islam, or Islamicized Radicalism?", *Chronicle of Higher Education Review*, May 26 2016.

[5] Gilles Kepel, "«Radicalisations» et «islamophobie» : le roi est nu", Libération, 14 March 2016, available at http://www.liberation.fr/debats/2016/03/14/radicalisations-et-islamaphobie-le-roi-est-nu_1439535.

[6] Robert Zaretsky, ibid; Gilles Kepel, "Le roi est nu", ibid.

The school represented by Roy sees ISIS militants as no different from the members of the Red Brigades in Italy or Red Army Faction in West Germany during the 1970s: **"The same rebellion, the same rupture, the same rupture with violence"**.

Kepel considers this to be utter nonsense. To him, the **mantra of 'radicalisation'** signifies **'the absence of analysis'**. He insists that Roy did not "hear the actual words pronounced by Salafist preachers in the suburbs, just as he had failed to read the tweets and tracts they were broadcasting". Salafism, Kepel argued, must be taken seriously – even if this leads to accusations of 'Islamophobia'.[7]

He cites a text, ignored by Roy and his followers, called *The Global Islamic Resistance Call*, which was written by Abu Musab al-Suri, a Syrian engineer and one-time functionary of Al-Qaeda who later broke with Osama bin Laden, and published in Arabic online in late 2004 or early 2005. That text offers a glimpse into what he termed in his latest book as **'third-generation jihadism'**.[8]

First-generation Jihadism, which lasted from the 1970s to 1990s, was represented by the *mujahedin* in Afghanistan and the Armed Islamic Group (GIS) of Algeria. **Osama bin Laden's** Al-Qaeda organisation represents the second generation of Jihadism, which took over at the turn of the millennium. Third-generation Jihadism, introduced by al-Suri's text, changed Al-Qaeda's model from centrally planned attacks against large and symbolic targets to a bottom-up strategy. A strategy privileging the **actions of independent and isolated groups**, who are already integrated in the West. The attacks in Paris and Brussels might well reflect al-Suri's destructive influence.[9]

"If you want to comprehend their functioning, you have to understand their background; you have to understand the intellectual resources of Salafism", Kepel commented to a New York Times journalist.[10]

Mr. Roy responded to the same reporter, scoffing at his colleague's reliance on Al- Suri's text: "Nobody is interested in al-Suri". He added, when Mr. Kepel "talks of a 'third generation in 2005,' that is false, it is exactly the same profile as in the second generation – petty delinquency." [11]

While some argue that the public spat between the two scholars reflects in part the confrontational nature of French academia, often based on **"schools of thought, fuelled by personal or institutional animosity"**,[12] the divergence in positions is hardly unique among those researching radicalisation and its violent version.

JIHADIST RADICALISATION AND THE SEARCH FOR A DEFINITION

Kepel, as it transpired from the previous review, was not exactly a fan of the term radicalisation. He called it a **mantra that indicates an absence of analysis**. While his disdain of the concept may not be globally shared, many scholars would agree that it has its share of critique. Lorenzo Vidino argued in his policy paper on "Jihadist Radicalisation in Switzerland" that the term has become extremely fashionable in the counter-terrorism community over the last decade. Its critics, however, see it as a concept that is "inherently arbitrary, lacking a common definition and often simply used to negatively connote ideas one does not like".[13]

> **The term "radical" started to be used in the 18th century and was often linked to the progressive values of the Enlightenment and the French and American revolutions of that period... Overtime, it also came to signify the support for an extreme section of a party.[14]**

In his conceptual discussion and literature review of the terms radicalisation, de-radicalisation and counter-radicalisation, Alex Schmid reminds his readers of the history of the term itself. The term "radical" started to be used in the 18th century and was often linked to the progressive values of the Enlightenment and the French and American revolutions of that period. It became widespread in the 19th century and referred to a political agenda advocating for systematic social and political reform. Overtime, it also came to signify the support for an extreme section of a party.[14]

[7] Robert Zaretsky, ibid; Gilles Kepel, ibid.
[8] Kepel, Gilles "Terror in Frankreich", p.11-15. The Arabic text of al-Suri can easily be found on the internet.
[9] Gilles Kepel, ibid; Robert Zaretsky, ibid.
[10] Adam Nossiter, ibid.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Robert Zaretsky, ibid.
[13] Lorenzo Vidino, "Jihadist Radicalization in Switzerland", *Center for Security Studies*, Zurich: ETH, 2013, p.11.
[14] Alex Schmid, "Radicalisation, De-Radicalisation, Counter-Radicalisation: A Conceptual Discussion and Literature Review", ICCT Research, The Hague, March 2013, p. 6.

In other words, **the term radicalisation changes overtime**. It is a relative term. In the early 20th century, those who supported the Suffragette movement – giving women the right to vote - were called radicals. By the same token, what is considered radical in one culture may be considered moderate or even mainstream in another.[15]

The history of political ideas on the concept 'radicalism', Schmid argues, points to a definition of two main elements reflecting thought/attitude and action/behaviour, respectively:[16]

- "Advocating sweeping political change, based on a conviction that the *status quo* is unacceptable while at the same time a fundamentally different alternative appears to be available to the radical;
- The means advocated to bring about the system-transforming, radical solution for government and society can be non-violent and democratic (through persuasion and reform) or violent and non-democratic (through coercion and revolution).

"Vidino insists that radicalisation, despite its shortcomings as a term, is useful to describe the dynamics related to the field of political violence. He identifies the definition of Charles E. Allen, which he describes as one of the most complete definitions, as it encapsulates many elements used by most scholars. Hence, radicalisation is **"the process of adopting an extremist belief system, including the willingness to use, support, or facilitate violence, as a method to effect societal change."**[17]

Accordingly, scholars often distinguish two types of radicalisation:[18]

- **Cognitive radicalisation:** defined as the process through which an individual adopts ideas that are severely at odds with those of the mainstream, refutes the legitimacy of the existing social order, and seeks to replace it with a new structure based on a belief system that is completely different.
- **Violent radicalisation:** occurs when an individual takes the additional step of employing violence to further the views derived from cognitive radicalism.

When radicalisation is connected to violent extremism, Randy Borum argues that the limited professional literature available has mainly focused on the question of ***why*** (and, to a lesser extent, ***how***) – "someone comes to adopt beliefs and behaviours that support his or her engagement in subversive and terrorist activities, particularly violence toward civilian non-combatants".[19]

Since 1960, academic research on the issue has sought the answer by investigating terrorist activity at different levels: individual, group, network, organisation, mass movement, socio-cultural context, and international/inter-state contexts. While 40 years of research have debunked the idea that only **'crazy' people engage in terrorism**, most contemporary social scientists look at radicalisation and its violent outcome as a ***dynamic*** process. The nature of that process, however, remains poorly understood.[20]

Dalgaard-Nielsen looked at radicalisation in its connection to militant Islamism. She defines militant Islamism as a **narrative of victimhood**. It "claims that Islam and Muslims are constantly attacked and humiliated by the West, Israel, and corrupt local regimes in Muslim countries". In order to return to a "society of peace, harmony, and social justice", this narrative calls on Muslims **"to stand up for their faith"**. Violence, including violence against civilians, is religiously sanctioned and brings the fighter closer to God.[21]

Dalgaard-Nielsen moves to identify two theoretical frameworks used in researching this dimension. First, the French Sociology School, which argues that there is neither a single explanation of violent radicalisation, nor one single profile of radicals in Europe. It offers classical sociological factors – e.g. socio-economic marginalisation, lack of education, neighbourhood solidarity and peer pressure – to explain radicalisation not only of individuals from Europe's lower social strata, but also of members of a well-off, apparently well-integrated Muslim middle class in Europe. This concerns individuals with no apparent lack of education, job opportunities, or resources to engage in constitutional politics.

The key contention of this group of sociologists is that "violent radicalisation arises out of the particular challenges faced by an increasingly Westernised generation of young Muslims in Europe, who attempt to carve out an identity for themselves".[22]

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[15] Lorenzo Vidino, ibid.
[16] Alex Schmid, p. 8.
[17] Lorenzo Vidino, pp.11-12.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Borum, Randy, "Radicalization into Violent Extremism I: A Review of Social Science Theories", *Journal of Strategic Security*, Article 2, Volume 4, Issue 4, Winter 2011, p. 14-15.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, p. 798.
[22] Ibid, p. 800.

While both Roy and Kepel belong to this school of thought, they came to clash, as explained in the prior session, on the role of **religious ideology in the radicalisation process of youths**.

Second, the Social Movement Theory and Network Theory, which focus on the specifics of recruitment and processes of violent radicalisation. Scholars such as **Quintan Wiktorowicz** and **Marc Sageman** argue that "violent radicalisation is about who you know—radical ideas are transmitted by social networks and violent radicalisation takes place within smaller groups, where bonding, peer pressure, and indoctrination gradually changes the individual's view of the world".[23]

In other words, as Wiktorowicz's research indicates, **grievances and discontent do not automatically lead to action, or outright violent actions**, for that matter. Instead, radicalisation is a **social process** that results from interaction with and within a radical group—a process by which **the individual is gradually convinced** that the perceived injustices require the individual to engage personally, and that violence is religiously sanctioned.[24]

These approaches and definitions look at specific dimensions of violent radicalisation in connection to militant Islamism. They agree that it is a process of some sort and try to understand what motivates an individual to engage in violent acts, but there is little consensus or clarity about *how* and *when* this takes place.

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Acknowledging this divergence of opinions, the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a Washington-based think tank, constructed a framework for understanding radicalisation, based on **"three overlapping but distinct elements that motivate individuals to becoming radicalised or committing terrorist acts"**.[25] These are:

- The ideas of the radical narrative that provide a filter for understanding the world;
- The sociological factors that compel an individual to embrace this radical narrative; and

- The psychological factors, characteristics, pathologies, and triggers that may prompt an individual to use violence in order to promote or consummate this narrative.[26]

Psychologists and behavioural scientists at the Joint Military Information Support Center (JMISC) introduced a broader model. They surveyed existing conceptual models of radicalisation and associated empirical research and then presented their own model – one that highlighted the major components of the radicalisation process that different models appeared to have in common. The model identified the following, seven interacting components:[27]

- **Motivations:** Motivations may or may not be the ultimate ***why*** of violent activity. In this model, they function as an initial impetus. Motivations are composed of both push factors, such as grievances, and pull factors, which may serve as instrumental (e.g. money) or expressive (e.g. perceived importance) incentives.
- **Socially-facilitated Entry:** Introduction to extremist ideas and to an extremist collective occur through family, kinship networks or social institutions (schools, religious training centres, prisons).
- **Splintering/Progression:** Becoming a violent extremist is typically not an abrupt, one-time decision, but one that occurs incrementally over time. It should be seen as a gradual escalation, or as a series of discrete actions or decisions that prime an individual for what should occur at the next level.
- **Intensification:** This is a group-based framework. It explains an individual's increase in extremism and deepening of commitment by in-group socialisation. Influence by a group leader and dynamics among its members shape an individual's thoughts, feelings, and behaviours toward those of the group, and nurture intolerance for those outside the group.
- **Ideology:** The role of ideology spurs heated discussions. At its core is a narrative that follows some forms of a script about something that is wrong/not right and some person or entity to be blamed for it.

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[23] Ibid, p. 801.
[24] Ibid, 803.
[25] Borum, Randy (Winter 2011), "Radicalization into Violent Extremism II: Conceptual Models and Empirical Research", Journal of Strategic Security, Article 3, Volume 4, Issue 4, pp. 43-44.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid, pp.44-45.

- **Threat/Defence:** An out-group threat is a key factor binding the in-group together (key element of the narrative) and it suggests that violence is necessary to defend the cause or the in-group, and rationalises offensive action as 'defensive'.
- **Belonging/Identity:** This element recognises that people sometimes are drawn to violent extremist ideologies and groups because they feel a need for belonging.This model uses a **working definition of violent radicalisation** drawing from the work of **McCauley** and **Moskalenko**, which views radicalisation as an "increased preparation for, and commitment to, intergroup conflict and violence… driven by changes in beliefs, feelings, and behaviours in directions that increasingly justify inter-group violence and demand sacrifice in defence of the in-group".[28]

Jihadi radicalisation and implications for policymakers

The previous review has shown that, while scholars differ in their definitions of the terms radicalisation and violent radicalisation, most agree that the two refer to a process.

T. Stevens and **P. Neuman** sum up these definitions by saying:[29]

> *"Most of the definitions currently in circulation describe radicalisation as the process (or processes) whereby individuals or groups come to approve of and (ultimately) participate in the use of violence for political aims. Some authors refer to 'violent radicalisation' in order to emphasise the violent outcome, and distinguish the process from non-violent forms of 'radical' thinking."*

This paper's author agrees with the previous summary, defining **radicalisation as a gradual process** involving individuals or/and groups, which lead to an i**ndoctrination into extreme ideas**. It sees this process as a spectrum, in which resorting to violence is its last stage. Because the readiness to use violence is often experienced at the end point of that spectrum, an inherent component of this process is a **cognitive radicalisation and indoctrination shaped by narratives propagated of radical forms of Islam**, specifically Salafi Islam. Jihadi Islamism is, hence, defined as the violent form of radicalisation motivated and shaped by the narration of **militant Salafism**.

Salafism is an orthodox Sunni movement, which emerged in the 1300s and was later revived in a distinct form in the 18th century, especially in Najd (a region in today's Saudi Arabia) by founder of the Wahhabi movement Mohammed ibn Abd al-Wahhab. **It advocates the strict practice of and absolute obedience to Islam** as decreed (according to their interpretation) by the Prophet and the early generations of his followers. These are known as the ***Salaf***, or the forefathers – hence the adjective Salafi. It rejects any form of mediation between God and the individual believer, and it strictly forbids the use of shrines or sculptures – a position that often led to their destruction wherever the Salafis came to power. It takes an intolerant fundamentalist stance towards non-Muslims and non-Salafis, and it obliges Muslims to distance themselves from them. It considers it an obligation of Muslims to respond to the call for holy war/***Jihad*** and defines the conditions for such a response.[30]

Quintan Wiktorowicz, an expert on Salafism mentioned previously, differentiates between three strands of Salafism.[31] The **purists** emphasise a focus on non-violent methods of propagation, purification and education. The **politicos** emphasise the application of the Salafi creed to the political arena, whereby the **Jihadists** take a militant position and argue that the current context calls for violence and revolution.

All of these three strands of Salafism, Wiktorowicz reminds us, share a common creed but offer different explanations of the contemporary world and, hence, propose different solutions. The splits, accordingly, are about contextual analysis, not belief.

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Stevens, T. and Neuman, P., "Countering Online Radicalisation: A Strategy for Action," International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2009, p. 10.

[30] Elham Manea (2005), "Regional Politics in the Gulf: Saudi Arabia", Oman, Yemen (London: Saqi), p. 20–22, 73–74; for more informtion on Salifism and the principle of *al-wala' wa-lbara*, see: Said, Benham T. and Fouad, Hazim (eds) (2014), "Salafismus: Auf der suche nach der wahren Islam" (Freiburg: Herder Verlag), p. 64–74; Brown, Jonathan (2011), Salafis and Sufis in Egypt, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*.

[31] Wiktorowicz, Quintan (2006), "Anatomy of the Salafi Movement", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, N. 29, London: Routledge, p. 208.

That said, the Jihadist form of Salafism is as much shaped by the teachings of Salafi religious scholars as by radical writers of the Muslim Brotherhood. For example, Ayman-al-Zawahiri refers in his book ***Knights under the Prophets Banner*** to Sayyid Qutb's concept of Hakimiyya[32] as the **"real spark of the Islamic revolution against the enemies of Islam inside and outside Islamic countries"**.[33] Similarly, the book of Al-Suri mentions Qutb, his trial and execution as part of the Islamic revolutionary struggle against the enemies of Islam.[34]

This brings us back to the significance of the **'Kepel vs. Roy' clash**. Many observers, including this author, consider the clash overly exaggerated. In fact, the two complement each other.[35] Roy would like policymakers to focus on the behaviour and psychology of the Jihadists who committed these atrocities – i.e. individuals alienated by their society. Kepel, while not at all disputing the alienation dimension, wants to expand the focus and look at the ideological/religious roots that radicalise these youths– namely, Salafism and its religious structures and tools. To him, the atrocities committed in France and Belgium are an expression of an Islamist radicalisation that took shape over decades, festering on segregation and lack of integration. In other words, Roy would like to focus on the individual and local drivers, whereas Kepel would like to expand our scrutiny of a global factor – the transnational Jihadi Islamism that feeds on these local drivers. Roy's position provides a politically correct way to discuss a delicate issue, while Kepel would like to get to the bottom of it, even if that would offend the sensitivity of some Western liberal and leftist academics.

Interestingly, if not ironically, the assessment of the former Kuwaiti Minister of Information, Saad bin Tafla al Ajami, appears to support Kepel's position. When he reminded his readers of Gulf monarchies' mainstreaming of Salafi Islam, he was in fact stating quite clearly that their political survival tactics led to none other than a ***radicalisation of Islam*** ■

[32] Hakimiyya is defined as the exclusive prerogative of God to fashion principles appropriate to the proper functioning of a social, political and economic order; God is the legal sovereign as well as the Lord of nature, see Qutb, Sayyid (1978), *Milestones*, Beirut: The Holy Koran House, p. 16 – 140; Calvert, John, "Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islamism", New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, p. 224 – 225.

[33] Ayman-al-Zawahiri, "Knights under the Prophets Banner in Arabic", *Forum of Tawheed and Jihad*, first edition, p. 14.

[34] Abu Musab al-Suri, "The Global Islamic Resistance Call" in Arabic, p174.

[35] Robert Zaretsky, ibid.